

where they work in virtually every profession, while often raising children and finding time to serve their communities in volunteer positions, which they do at a higher rate than the general population. The legislative success I have achieved on behalf of the Guard is the result of a partnership with the Vermont National Guard, and I am inspired by their guidance, their feedback, and their absolute devotion to service. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how much their service and sacrifices means to me and all Vermonters. They have inspired me throughout my career, and as I transition into retirement back home in Vermont, I feel reassured knowing our Guard will be there, ready to respond immediately to any danger or challenge, as they always have.

RANA AYYUB

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, we should all be alarmed by the increasing attacks against freedom of the press by governments around the world. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, in this year alone, at least 38 journalists have been killed, 294 have been imprisoned, and 64 are missing for simply doing their job, not to mention the countless others who faced intimidation, harassment, legal persecution, and threats. Today, I want to mention one.

Rana Ayyub is an award-winning Indian journalist who has courageously reported on religious violence, extrajudicial killings, and other matters of public interest in India. Her important work is driven by a sense of purpose and a love for her country and the ideals for which it stands. Yet she faces online harassment and trolling, death threats, and baseless government retaliation for her reporting. Despite the immense pressure to silence her by government officials who should be protecting her, she continues to expose the abuses of those in power.

Freedom of expression is the cornerstone of democracy. Without it, the fundamental differences between a democratic state and an authoritarian regime disappear. Throughout my 48 years in the Senate, I have often been reminded that we each have a responsibility to defend press freedom and amplify the work of journalists who shine a light on corruption, injustice, discrimination, and impunity. We must stand up for freedom of expression and the rights of journalists, so Rana Ayyub and her brave colleagues around the world can do their essential work without fear of retribution.

RECOGNIZING VERMONT'S CARING FOR VETERANS

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, Vermonters have a long history of distinguished service to the Nation of which I am proud. I am also proud that Vermonters have a reputation for distinguished service to those veterans

when they come home. I have been grateful in my 48 years to know so many Vermonters willing to help others and to be able to support their efforts from the U.S. Senate.

First and foremost, I am proud to represent the men and women of the White River Junction VA Medical Center and its associated community based outpatient clinics. Across Vermont, it is known that the best care veterans can get in the State comes from our dedicated VA employees. Earlier in my career, when a 25-percent funding cut was proposed which would have shuttered the White River Junction VA surgery units, I was proud to join Vermont veterans to fight to reinstate the funding. Today, my faith in our VA has proven right time and again, as it has become a model for the Nation. While national stories may swirl, Vermonters regularly tell me their preferred healthcare provider is the VA.

Right across the parking lot from the medical center is the National Center for PTSD, a world-class hub for research on the condition of and the treatment of PTSD. In 1984, I was happy to help establish by law such a center in the VA system and, in 1989, proud that White River Junction was selected to be the headquarters. It may seem hard to believe, but we had to fight for many years to preserve its funding so that researchers and clinicians alike could make use of its expertise to help veterans. We took a huge leap forward in 2013 in our ability to help when Dr. Matt Friedman came to me with the idea to establish a brain bank, so new, cutting-edge techniques could reveal more about how brain physiology affects and is affected by PTSD. I found the funds, and the research findings have already changed the perspective on PTSD.

It is not just Vermonters working for the Federal Government that care for our veterans, but a host of veterans themselves. The veterans service organizations in Vermont have been tireless advocates for veterans and worked in partnership with my dedicated staff when veterans had trouble accessing their benefits. Organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Association have shown the importance of veterans helping other veterans, and I have always encouraged it. In fact, in my first term, I helped establish the first vet center in Vermont in 1979, to provide readjustment counseling to veterans returning from Vietnam, often from other veterans, and I have been proud to support funding for the Vermont National Guard's successful Veterans and Family Outreach Program and Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Programs, which have become national models for reintegration of National Guard members returning home from deployment.

Along with healthcare, veterans in Vermont and across the Nation receive

compensation for injuries and illnesses associated with their military service. It has always been important to me that claims made by veterans are adjudicated fairly and timely. That is why I partnered with the Veterans Benefits Administration to ensure that the VA maintained and staffed veterans service center on the White River Junction Medical Center campus, and I was proud to cut the ribbon on that office in 2015.

Compensation and healthcare for veterans affected by toxic exposure has been a priority of mine for decades. This last year, Vermont veterans and their families led local and national movements to support the PACT Act and change the way that the VA deals with presumption of toxic exposure, which I am proud that the omnibus appropriations funds appropriately. From Atomic veterans to Agent Orange to Camp Lejeune, I have been proud to stand alongside generations of veterans demanding the Nation keep its promises, and I am grateful that this year we have made structural changes that should make a future fight for benefits easier.

As I leave office, it is because of veterans themselves that I am reassured. Whether working at the VA or National Center for PTSD, for an organization dedicated to veterans, or in the community as volunteers, veterans—especially Vermont veterans—are the key to caring for each other, and I have been proud to have done what I can from the floor of the Senate for the last 48 years.

CASEWORK

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, I want to speak briefly now about the tens of thousands of Vermonters served by my casework staff over my time in office. It has always been a priority of mine to make sure that my constituents could call my office if they were having difficulties with Federal Agencies and reach a knowledgeable and sympathetic caseworker to help them cut through redtape. When I first opened my Vermont office, people told me that if I gave out my office phone number, I would get inundated by phone calls. And I told them that I was elected to serve Vermonters. Since 1995, we have closed 25,000 cases, and countless more were closed in the day before digital records.

I deeply believe in the ability of government to help people who are struggling. However, I am not blind to the fact that the dual imperatives of efficiency and customer service mean that even the most well-intentioned government bureaucracies can be difficult to navigate at times.

The particular challenge of the Federal Government is its almost unimaginable scale relative to the individual people that it serves. Imagine that in 2022 an average of 66 million Americans per month will receive a Social Security benefit, totaling over \$1 trillion in